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NEWS

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105 HOUSE MEMBERS URGE REAGAN TO INCLUDE EAST TIMOR TRAGEDY IN FOREIGN POLICY AGENDA

WASHINGTON--Led by Rep. Tony P. Hall (D-Ohio), a bipartisan group of 105 House members has written to President Reagan expressing concern over reports of a new, large-scale Indonesian military offensive in the predominantly Roman Catholic island territory of East Timor, a former Portuguese colony invaded by Indonesia in 1975.

The lawmakers pointed out that the International Committee of the Red Cross has been denied unrestricted access to the territory and asked the President "to add the suffering of the people of East Timor to America's foreign policy agenda."

"Like Afghanistan, East Timor is the scene of massive violations of human rights and widespread human suffering," the letter said.

A devastating famine combined with Indonesian military operations against Timorese resistance has resulted in over 100,000 East Timor deaths since the 1975 invasion.

The letter also calls for the resumption of negotiations between Indonesia and Fretilin, the Timorese independence movement, and urges the Administration to work with Portugal and Australia on initiatives to address the underlying political causes of the ongoing human suffering in East Timor. Both governments have expressed concern about developments in the territory.

Reagan had planned to visit Indonesia during his fall trip to East Asia, but that leg had been cancelled along with a stop in the Philippines. "However, there is no reason to believe that the suffering will be postponed," Hall said.

The 105 legislators represent the largest single expression of congressional concern to date over the plight of East Timor. The text follows:

We are disturbed over the intensifying tragedy in the largely Roman Catholic territory of East Timor, the former Portuguese colony invaded by Indonesia in late 1975. Like Afghanistan, East Timor is the scene of massive violations of human rights and widespread human suffering. Although your scheduled November visit to Indonesia has been postponed, we believe it is crucial that the Timor tragedy be accorded serious attention in diplomatic contacts between the United States and the Indonesian leadership in the weeks and months ahead.

Let us state at the outset that we are keenly aware of the strategic importance of Indonesia and the need for continued good relations between our two nations. Nevertheless, we are sending this letter against the background of a widely-reported major Indonesian military offensive against Timorese resistance that may have devastating consequences for the entire population of East Timor. The Timorese have barely recovered from the disastrous famine of 1978-1980 and the military offensive of 1981, which caused a reported 2,000 deaths -- partially attributable to a forced march of tens of thousands of Timorese villagers.

In August of this year, Indonesian Armed Forces Commander General Benny Murdani stated that there would be "no mercy" for those in East Timor who continue to actively resist Indonesian rule. The latest offensive comes at a time when the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been denied unrestricted access to East Timor. This is especially distressing in view of ICRC's traditional role as protector of populations beset by war. In the case of East Timor, ICRC has provided the only meaningful neutral observers.

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Your Administration deserves to be commended for its generous financial contributions to ICRC's worldwide programs, greater than those of previous Administrations. In view of your Administration's strong support of ICRC, we believe that you will be concerned over ICRC's absence from East Timor during a period when its presence is of critical importance. We hope you will agree that ICRC should have immediate access to all areas of East Timor in order to conduct unencumbered surveys of the food and medical situations; to visit all prisons in the territory under ICRC's guidelines which call for private meetings with detainees; to provide general protection to the population in ways that ICRC deems appropriate; and both to continue and to expand its efforts in the area of family reunification. On this last point, we commend the Indonesians for the measurable progress that has been made in 1983. However, a number of individuals who have been waiting for years to leave East Timor continue to need special assistance.

The absence of ICRC becomes even more disquieting in light of a September report by Amnesty International which stated that the Indonesian military has systematically tortured and summarily executed many prisoners in East Timor since 1975. The report noted that a secret military manual even provides torture instructions for the Indonesian Army. In addition, a report received through church sources in September described a recent massacre of 200 East Timorese villagers by Indonesian troops. It should be recalled that these developments are occurring in a territory where, by most credible accounts, more than 100,000 people had perished by 1980 from the combined effects of the Indonesian invasion.

Taken as a whole, these recent developments are particularly tragic in view of the Indonesian-initiated negotiations and ceasefire with the Timorese independence movement, Fretilin, that took place only a few months ago. We believe that only through a resumption of such negotiations can there be a lasting, equitable settlement of this conflict. We think that it is in the long-term international interests of Indonesia to pursue such a settlement, and we urge you to advocate this course of action. During the past year, two of our allies with a longstanding interest in East Timor, Portugal and Australia, have expressed their concern about developments in the territory and have indicated their willingness to participate in initiatives concerning the well-being of the Timorese people. We hope you will work with Portugal and Australia to develop creative policies to address the underlying causes of the ongoing human suffering in East Timor.

We realize that there are many other important matters in U. S.-Indonesian relations. However, it is our sense that the fate of East Timor is at a critical juncture. We respectfully urge you to add the suffering of the people of East Timor to America's foreign policy agenda. Constructive diplomacy could prevent further bloodshed and misery in East Timor.

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